

QUESTIONS FROM MALAYSIA

(to Khang)

April 1978

Question about Kamma: Is it due to environment or hereditary causes that one is born into various conditions.

Answer In conventional language and in science we use the word hereditary a lot. However, in order to know the truth we have to consider: what are the realities—the nāmas and rūpas—and how are they conditioned. We have to consider conditions, and there are many different ones. The human being, what is it? Only different nāmas and different rūpas which are conditioned by different kinds of conditions, working at different moments of our life. As to the first moment of life: nāma and rūpa are produced by kamma. This is one of the conditions. But first I should explain a little more about kamma, which was one of your other questions.

Kamma This is another word for volition, which is a mental factor (cetasika) arising with each citta. There are many kinds of volitions, depending on the citta it accompanies. When the citta is kusala citta, the volition or kamma is kusala and it can motivate good deeds. When the citta is akusala, the volition is also akusala, and it can motivate ill deeds. (There is also volition with the citta which are neither kusala or akusala, with the vipakacittas and kiri-yacittas, but in those cases cetanā, or kamma, has merely the task of coordinating the work of the other cetasikas which accompany a citta. When you want to explain kamma in simple terms, as you told me, you need not mention this.)

As you know, cittas change from moment to moment, they arise and fall away. Now the citta is kusala, then it is akusala. At the moment you are angry and hit someone there is akusala volition which motivates the hitting. At such a moment you (but not really you, citta) forgot about kusala, and how different are the moments of kusala and akusala. At the moment you give, cetanā is kusala, quite different. How then could one take volition for self, a person who directs? Nobody directing, only different moments of citta, arising because of different conditions.

Where do such ugly things as akusala cittas come from? Where do kusala cittas come from? Then you are used to hitting other people you will see how this inclination comes up again and again. You have accumulated such a tendency. The way you were in the past conditions how you are now. Each citta which arises falls away completely, but it conditions the next citta and this in turn the next. Thus it is possible that each citta carries in itself the potential for good and bad deeds. We call this a person's character, but this is only a conventional term. Character, hereditary causes, these terms are not clear, we should look at the real causes of phenomena.

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Kamma can produce different results, in the form of rebirth (happy rebirth, unhappy rebirth) and also in the course of life: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, receiving bodily impressions, these are vipākacittas, cittas which are result of kamma. When a tree hits you, the tree is not the result of kamma, but the bodily pain, the citta which experiences that object is the result of kamma. A tree may fall onto two people, one may not have any bodily pain, the other may be hurt. Different kammās produce different vipākas. The thinking with aversion about what you experience is not vipāka, it is akusala citta, another moment again. But we confuse the different moments. When the doctor pricks you the aversion seems to be at the same time as the vipākacitta which experiences the hardness or heat, but they are all different cittas at different moments.

As to the environment into which one is born, that is not mere chance. It fits your kamma. The same is true about the parents, the family. It fits one's kamma, kamma takes care of it so that birth takes place in such and such country, into such and such family. Nothing is by accident, everything which happens has conditions.

If you want to explain kamma and vipāka in very simple terms, you could say that the good deeds and the bad deeds you do bring good and bad results, they come (so to say) back to you in the form of results, sooner or later, somehow or other.

Question Someone had an accident and his brain is damaged. Is that kamma, can it be cured?

Answer The citta which experiences the unpleasant object is the result of akusala kamma, but we do not know whether it is a kamma of a former life or of this life. Different kammās find their opportunities to produce different results at different moments of our lives. Brain is rūpa; it is composed of solidity, cohesion, motion, temperature and other rūpas. Brain does not think, brain does not know anything. However, rūpas condition nāmas. It is nāma which experiences, thinks, feels. When someone is what we call mad, there is still citta, so long as there is life. Citta and cetasikas. The family could even help such a person to do good deeds, but of course the conditions are not such that wisdom can be developed. But even when we are sane, consider how few moments of kusala and how many moments of akusala. And is there the development of satipaṭṭhāna? So, whether someone is sane or not sane is a notion used in conventional language. We are all in a way not quite sane so long as we have not attained enlightenment.

Question How to explain in a simple way to others about rebirth. Is there an intermediary state before one is reborn?

Answer There is today, and we know there was yesterday, then

why doubt that there will be tomorrow?

Now more in detail: you do not doubt there is citta at this moment, be it citta which sees, or citta which hears or citta which thinks. The citta now has been conditioned by a previous citta, and this again by a previous one, and so on, back until the first citta of this life. Also this first one must have been conditioned, by a previous one. It succeeded the last citta of the past life. The present life followed upon the past life. In the same way the next life follows upon this life. The last citta of this life will be succeeded by another citta, which is the first citta of the next life. So long as there are conditions for life, that is, so long as we did not attain arahatship we will not be freed from the cycle of birth and death. Just as life goes on now from moment to moment, so it will go on in the future.

In which plane we will be reborn depends on the kamma which produces the next rebirth-consciousness. The rebirth-consciousness, the first citta of life, is vipākacitta.

About the intermediary stage: from the foregoing it follows that there is no intermediary stage, citta succeeds citta, life succeeds life, no interruptions. It is possible that after this life there is rebirth in another plane and that life is very short to be followed by another life in this plane, but who knows?

Question What is dreaming? When we are asleep are we in bhavanga-atate?

Answer Not only when asleep there are bhavanga-cittas. ('state' is a word which is too static) There is seeing now, and then hearing and these experiences are not mixed, they are definitely different experiences, we can recognize them as such. The cittas arising in the process of cittas experiencing visible object are separated from the cittas arising in the process experiencing sound by bhavanga-citta. These cittas do not have objects such as visible object or sound which impinge on one of the six doors again and again. Bhavanga-citta is the same type of citta as the rebirth-consciousness, it is vipāka produced by kamma. All the time throughout life they arise in between processes, they keep (so to say) the continuity in our life, which consists of cittas arising and falling. When we are asleep there must be citta. When we are dreaming there are mostly akusala cittas, sometimes kusala cittas. Cittas experience objects through the mind-door, there are processes of cittas. When we are not dreaming and in deep sleep, in the bhavanga-cittas, they experience the same object as the last citta in this life, and this is the same object as experienced by the citta just shortly before dying in the past life. We do not know what this object is, (but I would not say it is impossible to know, that is for those who have developed wisdom.) We cannot speculate about that. But since we

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are born humans it has to be a pleasant object.

Why do we have to dream? It has to do with the bodily tiredness which induces sleep and very much with all our akusala inclinations, our worries, since we often dream about what we thought over during the day. It is very helpful to be mindful of nāma and rūpa before going to sleep.

Question The Buddha walked seven steps after his birth, and then you speak about other events of seven days. Then you add that the Buddha did not explain things which were not conducive to spiritual training. Yes, that is the answer. No use to speculate about it, it does not help us to know nāma and rūpa as they are.

Question In order to attain enlightenment one must practice vipassanā. Can one do sitting meditation, or awareness of the rise and fall of the abdomen? Or walking meditation? Or awareness of the movement of the footsole? Or just follow what you said in 'Buddhism in Daily Life'?

Answer You certainly should not follow anybody, people say many different things. But consider and check. Does it help you to know better the nāma and rūpa which appears now, be it seeing, hearing, touching or hardness, or heat?

When you sit, is there seeing? When you walk is there seeing? There is seeing in our daily life. There is hearing, there is hardness, there are all the different nāmas and rūpas appearing. There can be mindfulness of them if there is right understanding of them. It is listening and considering of what you heard about nāma and rūpa which can condition a kusala citta with awareness. We cannot have many kusala cittas, and so we cannot have many moments of awareness, it is not self. It is a sobhana cetāsikā, and how could there be a self which orders awareness to come and perform its function? Sitting cannot induce it, walking cannot induce it, following the abdomen cannot induce it. Such actions which aim at inducing sati are motivated by desire for a lot of sati, they are akusala cittas. Since desire can be so subtle, and the accompanying feeling is pleasant or indifferent, it can be desire in disguise. It can seem calmness, but it is desire. That is why all such practices are so very dangerous. The more natural you are, the better for the right kind of sati.

You may know how few moments there is kusala citta in a day. You cannot force kusala, it is anatta, not self. You know also that studying Dhamma is a good condition for kusala, but even study of Dhamma is conditioned, maybe you studied in the past. Each kusala citta is accompanied by sati. There are many different kinds of sati. Sati remembers what is kusala. When you give, there is sati which remembers to give. When you abstain from lying there is sati

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which remembers to abstain, it is sati. There is sati of samatha, tranquil meditation, it remembers the meditation object. There is sati in vipassanā which is mindful of any nāma or rūpa appearing right now. This kind of sati is different from the other kinds of sati, sati of sīla, sati of samatha, and it performs a different function. Still, we cannot choose what kusala to perform at which time, it depends on conditions. All sorts of kusala are valuable, let us not despise any kind.

As regards samatha, this is a way to have kusala citta instead of akusala citta, it is wholesome. When you are very angry the whole day, you may see the value of kusala and the disadvantage of akusala. You may suddenly see the other person you are angry with as a human being, towards whom you should have mettā. Mettā is very valuable, we should cultivate it in daily life. Maybe you have read about mettā and suddenly sati remembers. It helped me a lot that we discussed mettā so often in Sri Lanka. Or compassion. The one who treats you badly deserves compassion, he is really the loser, he makes himself unhappy.

The Buddha showed many meditation subjects and they are worked out in the commentary (Visuddhimagga): 40 in all. They are so very well balanced, they really work; they are conditions for kusala, if practised in the right way. One of them is mindfulness of breath (at the tip of the nose) and this is one of the most difficult ones. If we change it around so that it is easier we overshoot our target. What is the aim of this subject? To have kusala citta instead of attachment to our life, to our body and to our breath. One learns that our life to which we cling so much is dependant on this tiny rūpa which appears at the tip of the nose. If we say, 'Oh well, this is too difficult, let us change it and follow the abdomen,' we have a lot of material to cling to; how exciting, the movement up and down of the abdomen and the thinness of the whole body, make it so important. It is a very good work, it is not the practice of samatha, it induces attachment. And if we find breath too difficult, and it is difficult (hard to know its characteristic), why not take another subject such as the Buddha's virtues or mettā. Right understanding of the meditation subject conditions calmness. For the development of mettā you have to know what mettā is, different from attachment to the people you are with. And mettā and attachment can arise closely one after the other. It is necessary to know the difference. Samatha is not trying to concentrate. The concentration (which arises with every citta anyway) will grow together with the paññā of samatha, but it all depends how much accumulations one has for samatha. For laypeople there can be some moments of samatha in their daily life now and then.

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Vipassanā is quite different. What has to be known in vipassanā? Any reality which appears through one of the six doors, now. One nāma or rūpa at a time. While you are sitting, is there no hardness appearing? There are moments that you think of the body or your leg which feels hard. But there may also be a moment that there is only hardness, nothing else. At that moment there is no mixing the hardness with the concept of body, it is just the element of hardness, only a kind of rūpa presenting itself through the body-sense. This is the way to 'study' realities with awareness. Not study from books, but study as you experience different nāmas and rūpas one at a time. Person, body, dog, tree, are not realities, because what is really there? What is really there when we see a person? You cannot see a person; only the visible object is seen through the eyes. Thinking of the person: thinking is real, it is a kind of nāma. Person is not real, it is a concept or idea. Body is not real, it is a concept or idea. The body consists of many different kinds of rūpa which arise and fall away. When you touch a body, hardness may appear through the body-sense, or softness, heat or cold. These are rūpas which can be studied, not through thinking, but when they appear. This is the way to develop satipaṭṭhāna, quite naturally, in daily life. No sitting or any special preparation is necessary.

We have lots of misunderstandings about nāma and rūpa. Take visible object. We think we see a tree, but that is not so. Tree does not impinge on the eye-sense. When we pay attention to shape and form it is not seeing. We have to become more and more precise. When we close our eyes, no seeing. When we open them there is a reality which experiences something through the eyes, it is the citta which sees. First we know this through thinking, but when there is study in the right way, with sati, we will learn characteristics of nāma and rūpa more precisely. We cannot hear a dog. Only sound appears through the ears, no dog. Dog is a concept we think of. Thinking is real, the dog is not real. The Abhidhamma helps us with right understanding as a foundation for vipassanā.

You may wonder: in the suttas we read about monks who were sitting under the trees and developing jhāna. Khun Sujin (she is my good friend in the Dhamma, in Bangkok) had a short answer: 'They were sitting there already'. In other words, for those monks it was natural to be there and they had already practised jhāna. The Buddha explained to them how any reality can be object of mindfulness, even the jhānacitta. And they could be aware of it since they had no intention with desire to attain jhāna, they did what was natural for them. 'So, this does not mean that all of us, including laypeople must sit in seclusion and develop jhāna first. Everything that is natural for us, that we must do, if we do not lead our daily life there is self (an idea of self) who is trying.

This is no way to develop paññā.

And if you wonder: my paññā is so weak, what should I do? The answer is: all kinds of kusala, any kind for which there is an opportunity. Khun Sujin praised giving very much. She said, 'If we give, it helps us to cling less to our property and if one clings so much to one's possessions it is even harder to eradicate the attachment to self'.

When we read suttas, we can say that every sutta is a reminder for sati, even if it is not explicitly mentioned. Satipaṭṭhāna is the Buddha's teaching, and if we remember that the development of wisdom is the goal, even when not mentioned, all the sutta words can be such a very effective reminder for us. Giving is praised, why? If we accumulate giving it will help us to cling less and when paññā has been developed, it is paññā which can perform the function of detachment from self. When the Bodhisatta accumulated the perfections in dāna, sīla and bhāvanā, he always had in mind the highest goal which he would attain eventually.

The sotāpanna has eradicated all stinginess, he is truly a 'believer', that is, someone with saddha, with unshakable confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. This is in the following sutta, Gradual Sayings, Book of the Threes, Ch. V, par. 42, Characteristics:

Monks, a believer is to be recognized by three characteristics. What three?

He desires to see the virtuous; he desires to hear saddhamma¹⁾; with heart free from the taint of stinginess he dwells at home, a generous giver, clean handed, delighting in giving up, one to ask a favour of, one who delights to share gifts with others. By these three characteristics a believer is to be recognized as such....

1) 'Saddhamma' means the true Dhamma.

Venerable Phra Dhammadhara,

A few days ago I received your letter and it was the condition for many kusala cittas, -for both Lodewijk and me. You started your letter saying that you trust that we 'are managing to find moments in a day for stringing a further flower or two on the garland of good deeds which the Dhammapada recommends that we make of our lives.'

I looked it up: Dhammapada, Ch. IV, 53:

'As from a heap of flowers many a garland is made, even so many good deeds should be done by one born a mortal.'

Richard quoted what you had said in Adelaide once and I found it also a good reminder:

'As Phra Dhammadhara reminded us when he was in Adelaide, if you are not going up (with kusala) then you are going down. You can't coast along when you are developing sati. You are either accumulating kusala or it is akusala.'

Richard also wrote that when Jill was staying in Adelaide they talked about kusala: 'we discussed how much attachment there is to kusala and how pleased we are whenever the citta has been kusala. In fact the topic of kusala citta and many different types of kusala came up quite a lot in our morning talks over breakfast or in the evening when preparing meals. The most important thing was to realize how little kusala there really is— the minutes, hours, days or even weeks that could go by without kusala....'

Good reminder this one: if you are not going up, you are going down. And then our attachment when there is kusala. Richard wrote me another quotation from one of your letters and we find it a good reminder, helping us to remember how attached to sati we are:

'I believe that our preoccupation with trying to ensure the very best conditions for the development of sati reflects this lack of true appreciation of the value of being aware of what has already appeared now, by conditions, as well as revealing rather a strong attachment, more often than not, to that old 'self' who has now entrenched himself firmly in our lives as 'the Dhamma student' and practitioner'. The old woes and worries may have eased, but now we are oppressed by the frustration we feel when there are insufficient signs of progress.'

And Richard adds:

A very valuable reminder that and so true. Now it's "me" who knows all about the Dhamma. Lobha has another object to cling to.

Talking about Richard, he is so very thoughtful in sharing Dhamma and thinks of sending others useful things like tapes and books. I just received tapes of you speaking in Adelaide. He

writes in 'Metta' short simple articles explaining what it is we take for self: the five khandhas. He prepared with Jill a syllabus, introducing Abhidhamma at the University. Jill gave a talk about the ten puñña kiriya vatthus. I took her idea when I was asked to give a talk at a temple in the South of Holland on the occasion of Kathin. I looked up Khun Sujin's talk in Wat Saket about this subject and discovered that the tenth one—straightening one's views—pertains to every kind of kusala. (And this is also in the Atthasālini.) Any kind of kusala, every small gesture, helps us to straighten out our views: we start to think in the kusala way. When there is akusala we are like fools, when there is kusala we start to be 'wise'. I often remember Khun Sujin's words when I have to speak: 'And what about the speaker?' Saying things out loud for an audience is a helpful reminder for myself as well. Ever since, it has reminded me not to despise any kind of kusala appropriate to the occasion, and not to put it off, even though thīna and middha are there too.

And when explaining about seeing to others, 'what about the speaker? There could be awareness of seeing at that very moment.' Or at least the study with awareness of that characteristic. This morning on the tape of Khun Sujin: 'When you read about seeing, there can be awareness of seeing.'

I did the lecture in Dutch and then I repeated in English and briefly in Thai, since there were several nationalities present. The abbot wants to get people more interested in Abhidhamma and requested me to translate my 'Abhidhamma' into Dutch, which I have started. At the same time I am making some revisions to the English, having in mind a future reprint.

Two monks from France were present, one Laotian, one American (Phra Santicitto who inquired after you). After my lecture, meditation instruction was due (according to Achaan Cha's method) but instead the Laotian monk said that he was not sure one should require people to sit. He reminded us that there is the corpse outside and also the corpse inside ('pai nai'). He pointed out the shape of his head, a skull. Very good reminder. Phra Santicitto asked me how I could get people interested in kusala when they were not used to kusala. The Laotian monk asked about citta which falls away and still there is remembrance. I do not know whether meditation followed, but it was time for me to leave. I had also in this lecture taken the opportunity to explain what is citta and how kusala citta is conditioned; what cetasika is, etc.

The abbot will publish 'Abhidhamma in Daily Life' chapter by chapter in his quarterly.

Now to come back to your letter; I wish to quote for the benefit of others the words you wrote to Lodewijk, thinking of the

adversities one is bound to have when dealing with other people who may be unjust or disagreeable:

Having some small idea perhaps, Lodewijk, of the rigours of life you must have to lead among your colleagues, I'm anxious to encourage you to more kusāla, in spite of the difficulties you face—with the following lines from 'Lamp of the Law' (Translation in Wheel series by Ven. Piyadassi Thera of a Sanskrit Buddhist text by Sankara):

'Seeing well, he seems to be one blind;
Hearing well, he seems not 'ware of sound;
Knowing, he seems a fool of some kind;
Powerful, he seems to weakness bound.'

It is a description of one who manages "to hold himself well in, under the greatest provocation". What a sacrifice to deliberately choose to appear weak and foolish for the sake of "not undoing or slighting another at all, anywhere" (Mettā Sutta). Yet it is precisely and solely by gladly giving up what is of relative value thus (Ratana sutta-commentary) that the very things that we, at other times, did otherwise seek to protect (by not appearing weak or foolish etc.); are actually made secure and safe for us.

I looked up the commentary to the Ratana sutta, VI, 129, and it is in the story of Sankha and Susīma. The Buddha showed cause and effect of deeds. In a former life he was Sankha and his son Susīma became a Pacceka Buddha and later passed finally away. The father Sankha did honour to the Pacceka Buddha's shrine terrace and looked after it. The Buddha showed how these actions produced kusala vipākas in his present life, in the way of great ceremonial honour. All this honour was due 'to the might of former acts of giving up what is of relative value.' He spoke this stanza:

Now if a man should see full pleasure
In giving up relative pleasure,
Then let him give up relative pleasure
Seeing, steadfast, full pleasure (there).

A footnote gives the explanation: 'The point of this verse is not that one should merely give up a lesser pleasure for a greater, but that if one can come to see the pleasure in renunciation of relative pleasures as the greatest, then one should choose that, and renounce those.'

The giving up of one's defilements is the highest nekkhamma. When others are disagreeable it is a sacrifice not to talk back. One may seem weak and foolish. But keeping in mind not to slight anyone is kusala, and this is what is valuable.

You also quote a verse of the Dhammapada (V, 74), mention-

ing that it contains a very good warning about the peril inherent in blindly accumulating more and more māna (conceit):

'Let the laymen and the monks both think highly of what I have done. In every work, great or small, let them follow me.' Such is the aspiration of the fool; his self-seeking and pride increase.

Yes, we think it wonderful if monks and laymen think highly of our good deeds. This tendency has been accumulated, and it is good to know it. If we do not know it we accumulate more and more.

You made a small passage in the Expositor come to life, the passage about a dog, and it is a small sentence, one may so easily overlook: Exp. P. 471, (The Summary, Rootconditions, 365). It is about craving: "'Fluster" is the name of that craving by means of which people go about agitated in places where anything is to be gained, like dogs wagging their tails....' You mention that 'Manipulating, fawning and other such like deceitful behaviour (of which we may all be much more guilty than we realise) are, I think particularly ugly forms of attachment.' You then mentioned the Exp. text and added: 'in eager and concerned expectation of some tidbit? Yesterday I saw the temple dog here currying and winning favour in the most nauseating manner. When a third party entered the picture with a stick to hasten the creature outside, this normally placid and obedient animal, from his new-found position of strength at the feet of the head monk, then turned quite nasty, revealing clearly how deceptive surface amiability and docility can be (Vedehikā and her maidservant clever Kāli)....'

You asked me to write a bit more about seeing things as a 'whole'. Seeing things as a whole, not knowing, not seeing that there are only elements, nāma-elements and rūpa-elements. Seeing things as a whole: confusing all the different doorways. Seeing things as a whole: we 'see' people, we notice the whole body, we touch books but what is really there? Only different elements which appear one at a time. Visible object is a rūpa-element which can be seen through the eyes, hardness is another rūpa-element which can be experienced through the bodysense. But when there is the whole body, or even a hand or a finger which we think exists or people or trees or books, we cling to 'wholes', 'stories', concepts. But there are only elements, appearing one at a time.

When I had read your words encouraging me to take up Pāli again, there were conditions for me to run to the bookcase and take out my Pāli books and start again. I will see what citta will do. I would like to hear more examples from you about how Pāli conditions kusala citta. When I am really motivated I can do it; the lift of our apartment is very slow: aggi, aggiṃ, agginā. I have to stand in line sometimes at the grocers: bhavati,

bhavanti, bhavasi....(The small book fits in my handbag). When I am combing my hair and 'adorning the outward shape' I have in front of me a sheet with Pāli again: pāleti, pāleni.... Why not. And then, this study can remind us of the other study, the study with awareness of what appears now. But for a long time I felt a great gap, when writing about realities and quoting from the commentaries. Your words were the right condition. You write it in such a determined way that I trust that it will help with kusala, but it all depends of course on the citta which study. When I am nodding over my books late, I find that I always have a taste for Pāli, I still like to go over some rows of words, when I am too sleepy to read other things.

Finally, I appreciate the letter written by the kind Singhalese monk, he wrote it with kusala citta. But in the meantime you may not be at the same place.

Thanking you again for the letter, also on behalf of Lodewijk,

with best wishes,

Nina

May I add that I always remember something you said about speaking: you would rather not speak 'when the kusala citta would not come'. It truly helps me when listening to someone who preaches the wrong practice. To remember that one cannot help someone else but if kusala citta motivates the speaking. Then we may consider: is that person somehow giving us an opportunity to say maybe one line which could be of help? Because that is what matters, not to argue against him. It helped me a lot the other day when I had dosa and conceit.